



## Line Length & Column Width

By Ilene Strizver

### LINE LENGTH AND COLUMN WIDTH ARE TWO TYPOGRAPHIC TERMS THAT ARE CLOSELY RELATED.

Line length is normally expressed by the number of characters or words per line. Column width is measured in units – be it inches, points, pixels, etc.

To determine line length for optimum readability, a good guideline is between 9 and 12 words for unjustified text. Fewer words may cause the sentence structure to break up, and may also result in too many hyphenations. Both of these reduce readability. Conversely, a line with more than 12 words can become tedious to read. Additionally, a reader can easily get lost when going from the end of one long line to the beginning of the next, and may inadvertently reread the same line, or miss a line or two.

With justified text, the number of words per line should be between 12 and 15 words per line, to avoid excessive hyphenations, uneven word spacing, and rivers of white space in the text.

Several factors to consider when determining the width of a column of text are:

- **typeface (or font):** The width of the individual glyphs and the overall typeface design affect the word count per line.
- **point size:** The size of the type affects how many words fit in a line.

- average word length in the copy:  
You can fit a greater number of shorter words than longer ones in a given column width.

Typefaces vary in their *alphabet length*. The alphabet length is determined by

the width of the lowercase a through z, historically measured in points. This measurement varies depending upon the typestyle and point size being used. Therefore, varying the font and/or point size can have an effect on the optimum column width.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

ITC AMERICAN TYPEWRITER

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

ITC AMERICAN TYPEWRITER CONDENSED

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

ITC FRANKLIN GOTHI

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

ADobe GARAMOND

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

ITC GARAMOND

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

ROCKWELL

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

PERPETUA

If you have the fonts on your computer, it's easy to visually compare alphabet lengths of different typefaces (and sizes), as shown above in these settings.

## Line Length & Column Width (con't)

The final factor to take into account when deciding upon the appropriate line length is the nature of the actual text. For instance, some content – such as medical text – might involve many longer words, lending itself to a wider column width to avoid excessive hyphenations. On the other hand, text used for children and young readers might involve many short words, allowing for a narrower column. ■

**Webwise:** *On the Web and on tablets, e-readers and other mobile devices, type size and line length are not always fixed measurements as they are in print. Appearance can vary depending on the viewer's platform (Mac or PC), browser and version, screen resolution, default or customized preferences, as well as on how the text is coded. Nevertheless, the principles of what constitutes effective, readable text remain the same, even when the particulars vary.*

Many people don't realize that our eyes do not read character by character or even word by word. Rather, our eyes scan a line, pausing momentarily to record groups of three or four words.

### PERPETUA

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### OPTIMA

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### ITC AMERICAN TYPEWRITER

All three of these text blocks set at 12 point have the same number of words per line, but the width of the columns varies with the font used.

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### JUST RIGHT

The narrow setting in the upper left only fits three to five words per line, interrupting the sentence structure and thus sacrificing readability. Conversely, the setting below it challenges the reader with its wide column width containing 15 to 18 words per line, which can become tedious to read. The setting in the upper right is "just right."